

JOHN & JAMES DOBSON CARPET MILL (WEST PARCEL)
4041-4055 Ridge Avenue
Philadelphia
Philadelphia County
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-5383

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695-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
Mid-Atlantic Regional Office
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19106

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**HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
JOHN AND JAMES DOBSON CARPET MILL (West Parcel)**

HABS NO. PA-5383

Location:

4041-4055 Ridge Avenue, (bounded to the north by Crawford Street and McDevitt Park, to the south by Scott's Lane and the Richmond Reading Railroad and to the west by Ridge Avenue), Philadelphia, Philadelphia County, Pennsylvania.

USGS Germantown Quadrangle
Universal Transverse Mercator Coordinates:

A: 18/486090/4428500
B: 18/485970/4428430
C: 18/486060/4428330
D: 18/486170/4428330
E: 18/486250/4428390

Present Owner:

Rouse Urban Housing, Inc.
1500 Walnut Street, 19th Floor
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19102

Present Use:

Mixed commercial, industrial, and vacant.

Significance:

The John and James Dobson Carpet Mill is one of the most important industrial complexes surviving from the mid-to late-nineteenth-century manufacturing boom in Philadelphia. Begun in the 1850s, the mill's initial production was in woolen goods, which later expanded to include carpets and plush fabrics. By the turn of the nineteenth century the mill was one of the largest carpet companies in the nation and the chief employer in Philadelphia's heavily industrialized Falls of the Schuylkill region. The numerous buildings on the site were constructed incrementally over the mill's period of production and were designated as separate mill complexes, including Mill No. 1, (The Blanket Mill), Mill No. 4, the Brussels Carpet Mill (later the Falls of Schuylkill Carpet Mill) and the Plush Mills, all of which were part of the John and James Dobson, Inc. Mills. The buildings primarily reflect a simple builder-designed rubblestone construction. The mill, physically one of the largest in the country during the late nineteenth century, remains today as an articulate architectural statement on the evolution of a mill and the industrialization of Philadelphia.

Historical Context

The John and James Dobson Carpet Mill reflects the industrialization and manufacturing boom that swept the United States during the second half of the nineteenth century and made Philadelphia the nation's leading carpet manufacturer. The mill is one of the largest and most impressively sited and architecturally significant industrial complexes in the area.

The Dobson Carpet Mill is located in the region of Philadelphia known as the Falls of Schuylkill or East Falls. At this point on the Schuylkill River, the river's first natural falls, an abundance of streams, and proximity to early railroad lines made it an ideal site for the Dobson enterprise. This area of the city expanded rapidly during the second half of the nineteenth century when the Dobsons' Mill and the equally impressive mill of the Powers and Weightmen Company (now demolished) encouraged the growth of a community.

Although the growth of this region was primarily a result of the nineteenth-century mill expansion, the industrial history of the Dobsons' site extends back to 1761 when a 97-acre tract was conveyed from George Palmer to John Potts. As early as 1773 there is reference to a paper mill and a mill race on the site. In the early nineteenth century the use changed from a paper mill to a marble saw mill and works. In 1856 John Dobson obtained part ownership of the tract on which the mill was located and by 1860 had acquired a parcel totaling 13 acres and 43.43 perches.

The Dobson Carpet Mill was founded in the 1850s by John and James Dobson, English immigrants who had gained experience in the English textile industry. The Dobsons' initial success resulted largely from two factors; first, both brothers' marriages into the Schofield family, an important local milling family and secondly, their ability to produce woolen goods during the Civil War when cotton was virtually unavailable. At a time when many northern mills outfitted for cotton production were crippled, the Dobsons were receiving orders for 200,000 blankets.

Following the Civil War, Philadelphia's textile industry underwent a diversification of production lines and the Dobsons, keeping in line with the post war economy, became manufacturers of award winning Centennial era carpets. Even later in the nineteenth century, the Dobsons' interests were channeled towards the production of plush and upholstery fabrics, opulent textiles reflective of the change in American tastes at that time. In an 1890 publication, the Dobsons' output encompassed cloth and coating fabrics, carpets including Brussels and Wilton designs, worsted yarns, wool cashmeres and broadloom blankets. The Dobsons' mill continued to expand into the early twentieth century, with the construction of new buildings and modernization of the old.

John and James Dobson died in 1911 and 1927, respectively. Their deaths in combination with the Great Depression brought the mill's production to a halt. The Dobsons' ownership of the mill continued until the late 1930s when the trustees of the estate sold the property.

The configuration of the buildings on the Dobson site, although arranged in an apparently haphazard pattern, reflects their construction history. The earliest structures were located on either

side of Scotts Lane near Dobson Creek, which ran roughly along Scotts Lane. One of the earliest complexes along Scott's Lane was the Falls of Schuylkill Mill No. 1, it included Buildings 22 and 22A of the present complex. Scotts Lane divides the west parcel, the subject of this report, from a parcel to the east. Both of these parcels were owned by the Dobsons and developed as part of their mill operations. Shortly after the Civil War when steam was introduced as a power source and the mill was no longer dependent upon water, both parcels of the mill expanded to the south of Scotts Lane and to the north of the earlier buildings. Mill No. 4 for the manufacturing of cloth and blankets was constructed at this time. It includes Buildings 24 and 25 of the present site. With the manufacturing of carpets, the Dobsons constructed Building 1 (now demolished), a huge, six-story building with the facilities for carpet production in the center of the west parcel. This building expanded with five additions, including a boiler room to meet the needs of carpet production. This mill complex was known as the Brussels Carpet Mill. By 1894 the west parcel was essentially complete with additional mill buildings outlining and filling the center of the parcel, including a group erected in the 1880s along Crawford Street. These buildings, housing dyehouses and yarn making lofts, were used in the production of plush upholstery fabrics, and known as the Plush Mills. Scattered in between the buildings for textile production were the facilities, offices, storage and wash houses necessary to the operation of the complex. The Brussels Mill complex at this time was known as the Falls of Schuylkill Carpet Mills. This mill in conjunction with Mill No. 1 (The Blanket Mill), Mill No. 4 and the Plush Mills composed the John and James Dobson, Inc. Mills. The last phase of building on the Dobsons' west parcel occurred in the early twentieth century when new technology demanded increased space. These buildings were located primarily on the west parcel near the railroad tracks for convenience in shipping. Within the past fifty years a few of the buildings on the Dobsons' west parcel have been demolished including a mid-nineteenth-century residence located between Buildings 11 and The Tower, and the original Building 1. This building was replaced in the 1940s with a one-story cinderblock structure.

Aside from the most recent construction, the mill buildings at the Dobsons' Mill are constructed in a unified manner, utilizing local schist stone for construction and a design reflecting a utilitarian attitude towards mill buildings. The earliest structures are gable roofed with walls of schist, radially laid schist arches and barn dash mortars. By the mid-1870s brick arches replaced those of stone over the windows. Up until the 1890s the simplest possible wooden post and lintel construction was used for interior framing, some of which has since been reinforced with concrete and steel.

The early twentieth century brought a change in construction techniques and design to the Dobsons' buildings on the west parcel. Wood windows were replaced with steel industrial sash and roofs were flat without gables or clerestories. The last major building built on the parcel, Building 18, was designed by the mill architects, Lockwood, Greene and Co. of Boston and Providence. Though still using rubblestone, its steel lintels and windows and flat roof mark the twentieth-century era of new design.

Alterations over the past half century on the Dobsons' west parcel have been minimal and were brought about primarily by the modernization of mechanical systems and maintenance of the

buildings. Many of the roofs have undergone change as have most of the window sash. The modern asphalt paving of the site was added after the Dobson's tenure, prior to which the parcel was composed of compacted ash fill and minimal ornamental landscaping.

The buildings of the John and James Dobson Carpet Mill retain an extraordinarily high level of architectural integrity. The west parcel, which maintains much of its historic setting, is a highly visible local landmark reflective of the nineteenth-century industrial expansion of the nation and Philadelphia's role in that industrial revolution.

Chain of Title

(Including both the east and west parcels historically associated with the Dobson complex.)

- | | |
|--------------------|--|
| August 18, 1761 | George Palmer to John Potts.
97+-acre plantation or tract.
Deed Book 16:225 |
| January 23, 1769 | John Potts to Joseph Potts, "Gentleman" of Philadelphia.
96.65+-acre tract
Deed Book 16:238 |
| April 1, 1773 | Joseph Potts to Nathaniel Falconer, "Marriner"(sic) of Philadelphia.
96.65-acre tract. Reserved from tract was a 1-acre, 123 perches parcel on which a "new paper mill" had been built. This parcel had previously been conveyed to Morris Trueman and Joseph Crukshank, along with the rights to the mill race and to the spring near the milk house.
Deed Book 111:268 |
| September 14, 1790 | Nathaniel Falconer to John Redinger, "Yeoman", Northern Liberties.
Circa 97-acre tract including a "messuage or tenement." Redinger left this tract together with "all houses, outhouses, barns, buildings, etc.," to his son Frederick.
Deed Book D26:244 |
- Frederick Redinger took over the tract and appears to have regained control over the 1 acre, 123 perch parcel on which the 1773 paper mill had been located. Redinger left his property to his brother, John, and his sisters.
- John Redinger transferred the property to Marshall Sprogel who immediately sold it back to Redinger who then became sole owner of his father's farm.
Deed Book AM28:674, GWR34:195

- January 16, 1833 John Redinger to Hugh Scott, "Stonecutter" of Penn. Township.
Deed conveys the tract including the 1 acre, 123 perch lot and a marble sawmill.
Deed Book AM28:676
- August 12, 1845 Hugh Scott to Augustus Neuman, "Manufacturer" of Penn Township.
Parcel containing 13 acres and 43.43 perches including a messuage or tenement and a factory building. Scott retained the rights to a 30-foot lane for the purpose of watering his stock, now known as Scott's Lane. Scott's Lane divides the west parcel from the parcel to the east. Both were historically associated with the Dobson's operations.
Deed Book RLL52:1
- Neuman died in 1846 and his property was left to his two sons. The executor of the estate was denied authority to sell the property and thus it was leased to Neuman's former partner, Israel Foster. Later the property was leased to George Shaw.
- April 12, 1856 Sheriff's sale to John Dobson, Hugh Shaw and James Leeds.
Deed Book RDW76:86, RT 1:58
- October 11, 1860 Hugh Shaw and James Leeds to John Dobson.
Property of 13 acres, 68.33 perches contained 9 frame dwelling houses and buildings.
Deed Book ADB141:24, ACH119:98, 104
- December 31, 1938 John and James Dobson to Sarah D. Norris, et al (Trustees of the John and James Dobson Trust), 13.212-acre parcel.
Deed Book DWH641:41
- March 15, 1945 Sarah D. Norris et al (Trustees of the John and James Dobson Trust) to Dorothy Freidland
3/5 interest (7.9272 acres),
Ella Wolf (wife of Wm. J.)
1/5 interest (2.6424 acres),
Hortense Leroy Levy
1/5 interest (2.6424 acres),
Deed Book CJP838:224
- February 14, 1946 Dorothy and George Freidland and GIF Corporation to GIF Corporation.
3/5 interest (7.9272 acres)
Deed Book CJP1297:267

May 7, 1948 GIF Corporation to Hortense Leroy Levy and William J. Wolf.
3/5 interest (7.9272 acres)
Deed Book CJP2028:90

June 1, 1948 H. L. Levy and William J. Wolf to Ridge Industrial Properties
13.212-acre parcel
Deed Book CJP2116:441

At this time Levy and Wolf also sold off small lots outside of the Dobson complex, on the west side of Crawford Street and the east side of Scott's Lane.

April 30, 1968 Ridge Industrial Properties to O.M. Corporation
4041 Ridge Avenue
13.2962 acres
Deed Book JRS90:572

April 30, 1968 O.M. Corporation to Ridge Industrial Properties
13.2962 acres
Deed Book JRS90:575

February 3, 1988 Ridge Industrial Properties to Rouse Urban Housing, Inc.
10.46155 acres
Deed Book FHS992:040

This deed transaction marks the first division of the Dobsons' mill property since their acquisition of the site in 1860. The west and east parcels are divided by Scotts' Lane.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Aero Service Corporation. "John and James Dobson, Inc., East Falls." Negative No. 5986, May 17, 1926. (Free Library of Philadelphia, Print Collection.)

"Assessment of Archaeological Potential, Dobson Mills, East Falls, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania." Prepared by The Cultural Resource Group, Louis Berger and Associates, East Orange, New Jersey, October 1988. (On file at the Bureau for Historic Preservation, Pennsylvania Museum and Historical Commission, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.)

Baist, George William. Northern District of Baist's Detail Property Atlases of the City of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. 7 vols. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: G.W. Bromley & Co., 1901. Plan 17.

Barton and Martin, Engineers. "Topographical Plan for Dobson Mills." Prepared for Rouse Urban Housing, Inc., Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1986.

Bureau of Licenses and Inspections, Philadelphia County, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Curtis Cox Kennerly, Architects. "Dobson Mill Feasibility Study, East Falls, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania." Prepared for Rouse Urban Housing, Inc., Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1988.

"Dobson Mills, Demolition Issues Report." Prepared by Clio Group, Inc., Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1988.

"Historic Preservation Certification Applications, Part 1 - Evaluation of Significance, Dobson Mills." Prepared by Tim Noble, Clio Group, Inc., Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, November 11, 1987.

"National Register Nomination, John and James Dobson Falls of Schuylkill Mills." Prepared by Dr. George E. Thomas, Clio Group, Inc., Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, April 27, 1987.

Recorder of Deeds, Philadelphia County, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

PROJECT INFORMATION

The John and James Dobson Carpet Mill, listed on the National Register in 1987, is scheduled for rehabilitation into market rate housing units and commercial and retail space. The project, headed by Rouse Urban Housing, Inc., is being partially funded by a UDAG grant from the City of Philadelphia. The photographic record for this report was prepared primarily in the fall of 1988 and the written documentation in the fall and winter of 1988-89.

The photography for this survey was completed by Robert Tucher of Louis Berger and Associates, Inc., East Orange, New Jersey. The written documentation and supplemental historical research was completed by N. Catherine Claypoole, Historian, of Killinger Kise Franks Straw, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

